

CONTEXTS FOR COMMUNICATION

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The introduction of new media and technologies is the basis of the articles by David Morley, "When Television Was New" and "The Symbolic Life of Goods: Television as Sign". This is, for me, a perfect way to explore how the context is vital in explaining the effects when a new and highly important way of communicating is introduced. The fact that I can look upon this era with hindsight is obviously a huge advantage, thus why this topic can even be explored now. This also brings me back to the title of the article (originally by a text by Marvin (1988)) - "When Television Was New" - the fact that we can look back on a fairly old technology now, see it in as it was introduced, and see the expected impact and the actual impact. I will not only be exploring the new ways people could communicate via radios, and TV's, but also the effect this had on society and people surrounding these new technologies. I find it very interesting to consider that most of the population today sees a lot of the older technologies as a 'natural' entity since they know nothing different, however in different contexts this is obviously not the case.

I think firstly, and most obviously; the era is probably the most critical thing to understand if any sort of important factors are to arise about the context of these forms of communication. The ideas of domestic radio and, television especially, were both introduced in times where the woman was seen traditionally as someone to stay and work in the home, and men were to go off and work. This promptly put women at the forefront of one of the immediate problematic features - a distraction to the duties expected of women at home, i.e. housework. All of this is generally overlooked these days due to most people either growing to these changes or not knowing any different. From this, however, also derives another interesting point which Morley also touches on; he says, "Given that the driving force behind the development of the television industry in America was the advertisers, who wished to exploit the new medium to market consumer goods, the particular focus of attention was the housewife, as the controller of the domestic purse." Companies could now communicate so much more easily to women who worked in the home via this new medium and companies would soon take advantage of this to sell their products

and services. I think that this situation is a key point to make; the idea that there was a brand new way of advertising and selling to the public domain - especially within the domestic areas. An interesting way to summarise these points are to look at a quote by Coffin, Thomas E. (1955), "Judged by its rate of growth, the size of its audience, and the man-hours of attention devoted to it, television promises to become the nation's principal communication medium." I think that this sums up not only what we think of television now, but also since it is a source from the time - it also shows the realisation of the potential people saw originally also.

This brings me on to another key point which I found quite key in explaining the effects that this new sort of communication had. The fact that there was even a debate about, "...whether the 'living room' was, in fact, the appropriate location for the television set" (Boddy, 1984), seems strange today, however contemporary to this time the 'living room' was a place of unity for the family group. The radio had already broken this tradition a fair amount and as Moores (1988) says, "...this accommodation was by no means unproblematic". I think that huge parallels can be drawn from the introduction of the radio, to the introduction of television, and now even these days; as far as computers, mp3 players and other technological advances. This has put technology in the firing line as one of the main reasons that family life in modern day society is seen as a lot more segregated. However loyal families remain to each other, the overall unity of most seems to have been lost since activities like these were introduced. I think that I tend to agree with this thought, although I obviously don't know life without technologies like these.

Another point that Morley mentions is that "their entry is likely to be marked by thier differential incorporation into the masculine and feminine domains of activity within the home." He is suggesting than there was more than one context in which the television could have acted on peoples lives - generally because of their roles in the household. This could apply to more than one thing; for example, a woman would have been seen as the main target for selling domestic products etc., however men and the family would

have probably been seen as the main target audience for entertainment and cinema style programming. I think this general thought pattern was the driving force behind the redesign of television programming that Morley also talks about later in the article. Even in today's 'equal' world where men and women work, without being drawn in by stereotypes one can see a similarity in TV programming. For instance, during the day; talk shows, news and general interest programmes (generally seen as more feminine) are common, whereas, during the evening 'prime-time' television sees entertainment and comedy. I do have to admit that I still think that this is partly due to the masculine/feminine domains, however much it has changed. In certain contexts the way television is communicated can seem stereotypical, but I think it is all based on judging not only what is appropriate to show, but also how many ratings can be picked up along the way. This shows that the commercial side of this medium has grown even further than first expected I feel.

A television may not have only been seen as an item for entertainment, but also as a symbol - with the idea of 'material culture'. Morley talks about the fact that having a television set as a commodity where its only real purpose is to show social standing was and is not rare. The fact that having a television set - not necessarily for its main purpose, just its mere presence could 'mean' something to people is actually seen in two different contexts. In the past merely having one could prove wealth amongst other things, whereas these days this symbol wouldn't work since they are so common. However, should someone have a huge high-definition TV then this could have the same effect. I like the fact that this point could be relevant, even after 60 years or so - with just a slight change. The other way this symbol could have effect is (as Morley cites from Gell's (1986) account of the Muria Fishermen in Sri Lanka), "...the richer villagers now often buy television sets, which are displayed as the centrepieces of their 'wealth signifiers', despite the fact that the lack of electricity supply in the area makes their sets inoperable..." This just shows that in certain contexts an object like this can communicate in a completely different way. Its primary function remains dormant, however people can still enjoy it and it becomes a symbol to communicate to others. I am unsure as to whether this was ever considered when it was introduced, however new technologies will continue to do this in western culture and in the developing world in the future I am sure.

To conclude what I have found out by reading this article, I would say that the impact of

certain technological advances can be huge in more than one way - sometimes in completely unexpected ways. I think that introducing one of these milestone inventions will always bring problems and debate but can also always find a place in the household. The idea that a television could have, and still is used as a wealth signifier is almost foreign to myself, and probably a lot of people and I think that a lot of these arguments and points can all generally be summed up with one real element. Time. I feel as though as people have got used to the idea of a certain piece of technology, had time to adapt their lives around it in some cases, or have been born into an era that uses it, they become desensitised to the effects it has and it just becomes natural. It has obviously helped looking at these ideas using hindsight and I don't think a lot of the points would have been possible to consider in any depth without this aspect. Although I have generally concentrated on the idea, and contexts of the television I think most of the point that arise can apply to more than one item, i.e. radio, computer etc. I also think that this probably means that another invention in the future will probably follow this general pattern and adaptation in society. I feel that from now on there will always be a 'battle' against technology, however I also think that there will always be a 'middle-ground' where people are able to adapt to any changes like they have done in the past.

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